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The

ELLERY HAD NEVER BEEN

FICTION

THE Case of the Black Ledger was one of the biggest cases Ellery ever undertook, and its size was not reduced by the littleness of the effort involved. It consisted merely in acting as an errand boy, the errand being to take the ledger from the City of New York to Washington, D. C.

Why the transportation from one city to another of an account book worth perhaps two dollars should be a problem, why Ellery was the messenger instead of a federal agent, why he deliberately set forth on his mission alone, without even a weapon . . . the answers to these engrossing questions may be found in the proper place, which is not here. This story begins where that one ends.

In appearance the Black Ledger was unexciting. It had a hard binding lined with black leatherette which was scraped along the edges, its dimensions were six inches by eight and one-half inches, and it contained fifty-two thick, limp ledger pages rule-printed in blue and red lines, and all rather dirty. Yet it was one of the most infamous and historic volumes in the library of American crime. For on the blue lines of those fifty-two jammed pages were written the name and address of every important regional distributor of illegal narcotics in the United States, and the list was in the handwriting of the master of the ring.

IN THE spreading epidemic of dope addiction which was plaguing the forty-eight states, the federal authorities wanted this list desperately. The Black Ledger was a monstrous indiscretion, and to keep it from reaching Washington the quiet monster who had compiled it would stop at literally nothing. The two government agents who secured possession of it paid for their triumph with their lives. But by that time the Black Ledger was — for the moment — safe in New York.

At this point Ellery entered the problem.

The place where he examined the ledger and accepted the mission and prepared to carry it out was, they were positive, under surveillance. The master of this continent-wide criminal organization was no petty gang lord. He was a genius of withered soul, with immense power, resources, and connections, who had raised vicious crime almost to the level of respectable big business. Ordinary methods were bound to fail. At the least, a show of force on the spot might turn the

Mysterious Black Ledger

CLOSER TO DEATH THAN THAT MORNING WHEN THE CZAR OF CRIME ENTERED

HIS DRAWING ROOM ON THE WASHINGTON TRAIN

by Ellery Queen

Illustrated by Perry Peterson



Ellery was unmolested as he entered the station and made his way to the train

entire area into a bloody battlefield, causing the deaths of innocent people. Ellery's plan was accepted.

A drawing room on a morning train to Washington was reserved for him officially by telephone, and at the appointed time Ellery went down into the street.

The fall day was gray, with raw skies, and Ellery had hung an umbrella with a bamboo handle over his left arm. He was wearing a lined topcoat and he carried a bulging brief case.

Ellery seemed unaware that from the instant his foot touched the pavement his life expectancy dwindled to the vanishing point. Smoking his big brier pipe placidly, he stepped to the curb. A large black limousine drew up, and he got inside, nodding in recognition to the agent who drove it.

THE trip to the station was made eventful only by the fact that Ellery was followed by another car occupied by three men. But there was no sign that they were interested in Ellery. He did not see them in the station and, unmolested, found the way to his drawing room and locked himself inside, having first taken the precaution of surrendering his ticket to the conductor so that he wouldn't be disturbed. That, as it turned out, was a mistake.

He had hardly settled himself when the buzzer sounded, and a voice said, "It's the conductor." Since Ellery had only just left the man, it did not occur to him that the summons could mean anything more than an error in his tickets. He opened the door, and the three men who had followed him pushed in, bolting the door.

Ellery was hardly surprised to find that the monster had joined them. He sat down in the best armchair, an immaculately dressed man of middle age with grudging pale hair parted cleverly in the middle and hot, sore-looking eyes. This creature was a millionaire, thought Ellery, a millionaire who had made his millions by destroying the will and health and future of thousands of foolish people, many of them children and adolescents.

Ellery said, "You had the phone tapped, of course."

The narcotics king did not reply. He glanced at the larger of his two strong-arm men, the one with the boneless nose.

Nose said instantly, "He didn't speak to

nobody when he come out. Nobody come near him except the driver of the car, and he didn't touch nothing. This man didn't drop nothing in the car. We looked."

The monster in the chair glanced at the other large man, the one with the tic in his right eyelid.

"Nobody else gets out up there," said Tic. "And Al is keeping in touch by the train phone from the lounge."

The sore eyes now turned their full animal suffering on Ellery. "You want to live?" He had a soft, womanish voice.

"As much as the next man," said Ellery, trying to keep his tongue from rattling.

"Then hand it over."

Ellery swallowed and said, "Oh, come."

Nose grinned, but the monster said to him. "No. First open his bag."

Nose dumped the contents of Ellery's brief case on the floor. It consisted of a single object, a crisp new Manhattan telephone directory.

"Nothing else in the bag?"

"Not a thing." Nose tossed the empty brief case to one side. He picked up the big directory and riffled it twice.

"Screwly thing to be lugging around," remarked Tic.

"My favorite train reading," said Ellery. He felt urgently like asking for a drink of water, but he decided against it.

"Not in here," said Nose.

"His coat and hat."

Nose shucked him like an ear of corn while Tic examined Ellery's snapbrim.

"It wouldn't be in here," he complained. "It's too big."

Nose jeered. "With the cover it's too big. This is a smart operator. He tore out the pages and crumpled 'em up."

"But fifty-two pages," protested Tic.

THE monster said nothing. His red glance was fixed on the furled umbrella, which Ellery had retrieved and was clutching. Suddenly he reached over and yanked. He removed the umbrella cover slowly and slowly pressed the catch and pushed. The umbrella opened. After a moment he tossed it away.

Nose said, "Not in the coat." The lining lay on the floor, he had torn the pockets out, and he had ripped the seams wherever the material doubled over.

"Strip him."

Ellery felt his knees buckle under the pain of Nose's grip. Tic did the stripping, without kindness. Sore Eyes watched the denuding process with the unblinking patience of a crocodile.

"Leave me my shorts!" said Ellery wildly.

They left him nothing. Mother-naked, he was permitted to wrap himself in the wreck of his topcoat, crouch in a chair, and smoke his pipe. It tasted like fuming brass, but it gave him comfort.

He reached for the Manhattan telephone book just as the train pulled out of the station. He knew that there would be no interruptions until he reached Washington — if, indeed, he ever reached it.

But he was wrong. At the next stop, a man entered the drawing room. Nose called him Doc. Doc, a fat little man with three chins and no hair, was carrying a black bag. He eyed Ellery with the brisk anticipation of a professor approaching the cadaver tank in a dissecting room.

Ellery clutched the Manhattan directory and braced himself.

THE train was roaring through New Jersey when Doc, busily at work, referred to himself jestingly as Secretary of the Department of the Interior. By the time the train was rolling into Pennsylvania Doc was no longer jesting; he was perspiring.

Shutting his bag, he made his report to the man in the armchair in a strained voice.

It was negative.

The man in the armchair said to Tic, "Tell Al to phone Philly. I want Jig with some equipment." Then he looked at Ellery and for the first time showed his false teeth in a nightmarish smile. "Secret writing," he said softly. "Just in case."

Jig got on at Philadelphia. Later on, Nose made some exterior reports, and Jig completed them. Jig was a tall skinny man with no shoulders and a clubfoot.

The Black Ledger, whole or in parts, was not in Ellery's suit, as the ruins of his trousers and jacket testified. His oxford shirt, necktie, undershirt, shorts, and socks had been carefully manhandled. His shoes had been tapped, probed, slit, and all but turned inside out. Even his belt, an unmistakably single strip of cowhide, had been cut apart.

All his possessions were on display. Keys and coins were pronounced solid. His wallet

contained ninety-seven dollars, a money order stub, a New York State operator's license, a dues receipt from the Mystery Writers of America, five business cards, and seven jottings of ideas for stories.

His checkbook had been gone over page by page, including the stubs. His tobacco pouch had been found to contain pipe tobacco, and an unopened packet of cigarettes was opened and found to contain cigarette tobacco. A letter from his publisher demanded the return of galley proofs three weeks overdue, and a letter postmarked Orangeburg, New York, from a man signing himself Adolf Hitler threatened to kill Ellery Queen unless Ellery Queen saved the writer from being killed by an invisible enemy.

And Jig caressed his Adam's apple and said that nothing from, on, or about the guy concealed secret writing. This covered every surface capable of taking a fluid impression, not excluding the guy's epidermis. Jig used the word epidermis.

By this time they were approaching Maryland.

The monster sucked his lower lip.

"Maybe," said Nose in the silence, "maybe he memorized the names . . . huh?"

"Yeah!" Tic looked relieved. "They could still have the book back in New York and he's carrying it all in his head."

THE man in the chair looked up. "There's twenty-eight names to a page, and fifty-two pages, almost fifteen hundred names. Who is he, Einstein?" He said suddenly: "That phone book you picked up again. What's the gag?"

Ellery tamped a fresh load into his pipe to give his fingers something to do. "Some people relax with mystery stories. I can't — I write them. The phone book does it for me."

"I bet." The sore eyes glittered. "Jig, give that book the business!"

Nose tore it from Ellery's hand.

"But I already tested it for secret writing," said Jig.

"To hell with secret writing. We're after a list of names. And in a New York phone book you got about every kind of name there is! Look for tiny marks next to names — pinpricks, pencil dots, impressions of nails — anything!"

Continued on page 11

THE MYSTERIOUS BLACK LEDGER

Continued from page nine

"Would someone mind," Ellery asked plaintively, "giving me a light?"

They were pulling into Washington when Jig came back from the compartment in which he had set up his impromptu laboratory.

"No marks," he mumbled. "No nothing. It's just the way it came off the press."

"And nobody's still tried to leave that joint in New York we got covered," muttered Tic. "Al phoned from Baltimore."

THE man in the chair said slowly, "So he's a decoy after all. They figured they'd pull us off with him while some other guy got away. Only they got another figure coming. Sooner or later the real boy scout's got to try to sneak out of that building."

The train was standing in the Washington terminal when Ellery, looking more like a hobo after a bad season than a respectable gentleman-writer-detective, picked up his umbrella and said with pale whimsicality, "Do I get shot in the back as I leave?"

"Wait a minute," said the monster. "Where you going with the umbrella?"

"Umbrella?" Ellery glanced blankly down at it. "Why, you examined this yourself."

"So that was it," and now the womanish voice had a vicious sting. "I examined it, all right — the wrong part! It's in the bamboo handle. You rolled up the pages of the ledger and stuffed them into the hollow head of that bumbershoot! Take it from him!"

Ellery found himself in Tic's grip staring fascinated as Nose demolished the handle of the umbrella.

And when it was thoroughly demolished there was nothing on the floor of the drawing room but some curved splinters of bamboo.

The monster rose, his sore eyes smoldering. "Boot him," he choked, "boot him out of here!"

Twenty-six minutes later Ellery was escorted into the private office of a very important executive of a very important branch of the government in a very important building in Washington.

"I'm the messenger from New York," said Ellery, "and I've brought you the Black Ledger."

Editor's query: Where and how did Ellery hide the Black Ledger?

Ellery did not see the monster again until the trial in federal court. They met in the corridor during a recess. The narcotics king

was surrounded by bailiffs and lawyers and newspapermen, and he was looking exactly like a criminal who expects the worst. Nevertheless, the moment he spied Ellery his face brightened and he jumped forward and seized Ellery by the arm and pulled him aside.

"Keep those monkeys away from here a minute!" he shouted, and then he said piteously: "Queen, you're a lifesaver. This thing's been driving me bats. Ever since you outsmarted me on that damn train, I've been asking myself how you did it. It wasn't on you, it wasn't in you, it wasn't in that phone book or umbrella. So where was it? Would you please tell me?"

"I don't mind kicking a man when he's down," said Ellery coldly, "not when he's a so-called man like you. Certainly I'll tell you. The phone book and umbrella were herrings. I had to keep you occupied with your own royal cleverness. The ledger never left my hand."

"What are you giving me?" howled the monster.

"It's the size of the ledger and the quantity of its contents that threw you. You never stopped to think that size and quantity can be reduced."

"Huh?"

"MICROFILM," said Ellery. "During the war the government used it to reduce each letter of troop mail to one-quarter of a square inch. A ton of ordinary mail — eighty-five thousand letters — on microfilm weighs only twenty pounds. All I had to do was have fifty-two sheets six by eight and a half inches photographed down to microfilm. Result: a mere thirteen feet of film less than a half-inch in width. When it was wound up in a tight roll..."

"But in your hand," said the monster dazedly. "I'd have bet a million to one you couldn't be palming anything..."

"I'd hardly have taken a foolish chance like that," said Ellery. "No, the roll of film was in something — in fact, in two things. And I kept applying matches to it regularly all the way from New York to Washington."

"Matches! You set fire to it?"

"Nice touch, don't you think? Oh, it was in a fireproof container, a cartridge shell just big enough to hold it, and capped tightly. The container was tucked away in the bottom of my pipe bowl. It made a brassy smoke," said Ellery, "but when I think of all those kids who've learned to smoke marijuana and shoot themselves full of your heroin, I'd say it was worth it — wouldn't you?"

The End



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